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SUBJECT: MGLE01: PM A/S HILLEN MEETS DEPUTY PM AND DEFENSE
MINISTER MURR

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Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)
) .

SUMMARY

1. (S) In a 5/4 dinner meeting with the Ambassador and PM A/S Hillen, Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Elias al-Murr said that enhanced U.S. security assistance would boost morale in the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and make his job easier in soliciting equipment donations from Gulf countries. Murr claimed that he simply wanted to keep the LAF "alive" for the next half-decade, until a regional "solution" could ease pressure on Lebanon. Worried about both Hizballah and Sunni militants, Murr was particularly interested in the LAF's counter-terrorism capabilities, claiming to have already formed the "best counter-terrorism strike force in the Middle East." Admitting that this particular unit was predominantly Christian, Murr claimed to have dramatically shifted the sectarian balance of the LAF in favor of Christians and Sunnis over the past year. End summary.

NO "SHOPPING LISTS"

2. (S) At a May 4 dinner hosted by the Ambassador, visiting PM Assistant Secretary Hillen told Murr in general terms about U.S. plans for enhanced security assistance to Lebanon. Murr responded positively, adding that the Lebanese government needed to keep its requirements for assistance -- specifically, military equipment -- "down to earth." He criticized the "shopping lists" of equipment that both the LAF and Internal Security Forces (ISF) had put together in the past, saying they exceeded those organizations' needs as well as their capabilities.

U.S. HELP PROVIDES LEVERAGE IN THE GULF

3. (S) Murr said that, once the Defense Ministry had a realistic list of equipment needs, U.S. support -- even if it consisted only of spare parts and training -- would let him make a stronger case for assistance from Gulf Arab states as well. He preferred donations of second-hand equipment to funding, and Gulf countries were the ideal sources. This was

because much of their own equipment was U.S.-origin and therefore compatible with the LAF's existing stocks of equipment and its maintenance know-how. Also, the military equipment of Gulf countries has typically not seen much use, so it tends to be reasonably well maintained and low on wear and tear.

U.K. ASSESSMENT: ESSENTIAL STARTING POINT

¶4. (S) Murr said he would personally take charge of developing a list of LAF equipment needs. (He claimed to have told an assembly of senior LAF officers on his first day on the job that he would not be the kind of minister who delegates everything to the LAF Commander). An important starting point was a written assessment of LAF capabilities developed by the British military and provided just two days earlier to Murr by the British Ambassador. (Comment: We separately received a copy from the British.) It included a "very realistic" list of immediate LAF equipment needs, the projected cost of which would be "normal," not excessive. "I have to use it," Murr said of the British document.

SECURITY ASSISTANCE GOOD FOR MORALE

¶5. (S) Murr told Hillen that, besides giving Lebanon more leverage as it "marketed" for military equipment from Gulf countries, U.S. assistance provided an important boost to LAF morale. It even helped keep the LAF, with its multi-confessional makeup, united. Murr asserted that even Shi'a personnel in the LAF would get a morale boost from enhanced U.S. assistance.

¶6. (S) Increased U.S.-Lebanese military-to-military ties also kept Lebanon's civilian security services in better shape, according to Murr. Citing his experience in running both the LAF (in his current position) and the ISF (in his

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earlier terms as Interior Minister from 2000 to 2004), Murr said he knew that, "without a strong army, we'll lose independence. . . we'll lose control of the ISF." A strong LAF was essential "if we have to implement (UN Security Council Resolution) 1559," he added.

PLAN FOR A FUTURE LAF

¶7. (S) Murr concluded by saying that secondhand equipment from Gulf countries, combined with U.S.-provided training and equipment, would allow him to build a "well-equipped" LAF "within six months." A/S Hillen told Murr that the security assistance package (Section 1206) currently awaiting President Bush's signature was appropriate for Lebanon's needs as Murr had described them. It was a simple package that met Lebanon's needs directly. Hillen said that the USG could also play a supportive role as Lebanon sought supplemental assistance from Gulf countries.

¶8. (S) Murr said his plan for the LAF involved:

- Recruiting 8,000 more personnel;
- Securing needed equipment from foreign donors;
- Maintaining a sectarian equilibrium within the ranks; and
- Maximizing training opportunities in countries like the United States and the United Kingdom.

¶9. (S) On the last point, Murr said he would emphasize foreign training for the approximately 5,000 junior officers within the LAF's officer corps of 7,000. His goal was to gradually erode the influence of the "Syrian-Russian" model inculcated over a decade-and-a-half of Syrian-provided

training.

¶10. (S) Murr added that he did not want a "heavy" army, but a "light" one. He envisioned a force structure consisting of five heavy brigades, one for each of Lebanon's governorates. The rest of the LAF would be transformed into light, highly-mobile groups that could deal with problems in the country's interior.

¶11. (S) Murr suggested that his ultimate goal was relatively modest. He simply wanted to keep the LAF "alive" for the next half-decade. Beyond that, he counted on "a solution in the region" -- addressing Iran, Syria, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict -- to ease the pressures that Lebanon is currently experiencing. Describing himself as "not very optimistic" about Lebanon's future, Murr said that the best Lebanon could hope for was to become a Singapore-like entrepot for the region.

JORDANIAN TANKS OFFER

¶12. (S) Murr said that a reported Jordanian offer of M-60 tanks so far was only "a story." The LAF could use M-60 tanks, because its existing tanks were obsolete. However, Murr was unwilling to devote limited resources to cover the costs (refurbishment, shipping, maintenance) he expected the supposed Jordanian offer to involve.

¶13. (S) Murr said he would prefer to spend limited resources on M-113 tracked vehicles and light wheeled vehicles for the use of the LAF's special forces. If things ever got to the point where the LAF actually needed to use M-60s, Murr said, it would be too late for them to do much good. By that point, he suggested, Lebanon would be in a state of civil war, and the LAF would have split into three parts.

BUILDING COUNTERTERRORISM FORCES...

¶14. (S) Murr appeared keenly interested in the LAF's special forces and their counter-terrorism applications. He claimed to have made a major effort over the past year, since taking office, to build the special forces' capabilities. As a result, Lebanon had the "best counter-terrorism strike force in the Middle East."

¶15. (S) "I can count on this group," Murr said of the LAF

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special forces' counter-terrorism strike force, in a variety of contingencies, including airplane hijackings, school hostage-takings, and attacks on foreign embassies. Since taking office, he had presided over the training of 500 LAF counter-terrorism personnel. They currently made up eight brigades that were adequately equipped. They had certain unmet equipment needs, such as telecommunications equipment and helicopters, according to Murr.

... THAT COULD EVEN CONFRONT HIZBALLAH?

¶16. (S) Pressed for more details on this group (comment: of which we have heard nothing from LAF contacts who should know), Murr said that its sectarian composition (a classically Lebanese matter) was about 70 percent Christian, 30 percent Sunni Muslim. To ensure reliability from a security point of view, members of the group had been recruited from sons of trusted LAF personnel. Murr expressed hope that the group would be reliable and capable enough that, if necessary, it could be used against Hizballah.

WHOSE JOB IS COUNTER-TERRORISM?

¶17. (S) Asked whether counter-terrorism was properly the

LAF's mission or the ISF's, Murr said that this was a "classical problem" that pitted militaries against police departments all over the world. "The results are important," he said, and this meant that, in Lebanon's case, both the ISF and LAF needed involvement, preparation, and support. Murr noted that the LAF's (Maronite) commander, General Michel Suleiman, had doubts about the ISF's role in counter-terrorism. Suleiman based his concerns on the grounds that ISF intelligence director Wissam El-Hassan -- a Sunni Muslim and Hariri family protege -- was incapable of tackling the threat posed by Sunni militants.

¶18. (S) Murr said that, as Interior Minister, he had created the ISF's counter-terrorism groups as well. Unfortunately, his successor as Interior Minister, Suleiman Franjieh -- a member of the pro-Syrian "loyalist" cabinet of then-Prime Minister Omar Karame -- had "destroyed" them. (Apparently the SARG was unhappy that Murr had created them in the first place.) However, the ISF counter-terrorism groups' capabilities could be rebuilt "quickly" once the decision to do so was taken, Murr said.

DOES THE LAF HAVE "TOO MANY" MUSLIMS?

¶19. (S) Sectarian balance was very much on Murr's mind. He claimed to have dramatically shifted the confessional balance of the LAF during his tenure as minister, so that it was not excessively weighted in favor of Shi'a Muslims. Specifically, he claimed to have created 10,000 new positions in the LAF, for which he had exclusively recruited Christians (mostly) and Sunnis. As a result, the ratio of Muslims to Christians in the LAF had gone from 58 percent a year ago to 35 percent. Over time, he hoped that Shi'a communal support for Hizballah would diminish.

DARK VIEW OF SYRIA

¶20. (S) In the meantime, Lebanon remained in a dangerous neighborhood, according to Murr. There was no "minimum role" in Lebanon that Syrian President Asad's regime would accept. Murr was scathing when it came to Asad. Were it not for Asad, he said, "you wouldn't have 2,000 troops killed in Iraq. . . you wouldn't have instability in Lebanon."

¶21. (S) Murr accused the SARG of playing a double game, winning the support of Arab and European governments by presenting itself as a bulwark against Sunni militants, while at the same time manipulating Sunni militant groups for its own purposes. He also expressed concern about the effect a nuclear-armed Iran would have on the situation in Lebanon.

GOING IT ALONE?

¶22. (S) Murr -- whose hobbies include piloting jets and helicopters -- described himself as flying solo in more ways

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than one. Other than him, "nobody" was working to build strong national institutions. "I am alone," said Murr, who recently divorced his wife -- and President Lahoud's daughter -- Carine. The assassination attempt he survived in July 2005 had been directed against him -- undoubtedly by the SARG, in his view -- because "I was doing a good job."

¶23. (S) Murr noted that the Hizballah member of Prime Minister Siniora's cabinet, Mohammad Fneish, during a break in a recent cabinet meeting, had passed on a warning that al-Qa'ida-like groups might make another run at Murr in the form of a suicide attack. (Note: A stationary, vehicle-borne explosive device was used in the previous attempt on Murr's life.) Murr worried about the "message" that Hizballah, via Fneish, had passed him, saying it appeared to be "laying the groundwork" for another attack.

Murr even suggested -- without offering specifics -- that many terrorist attacks in Lebanon were a "joint venture" between Sunni militants, who provided the operatives; Hizballah, which offered surveillance and intelligence; and the SARG, which took the decisions to execute attacks.

READY TO DEAL WITH SUNNI
MILITANTS "ONCE AND FOR ALL"

124. (S) On the subject of Sunni militants, Murr said that those released under a 2005 amnesty law -- the so-called "Danniyeh" and "Majdel Anjar" groups -- were being kept under close surveillance, particularly after the February 5 riots in Ashrafieh. (Murr noted that, had he been in Lebanon rather than undergoing medical treatment in Switzerland during the February 5 riots, he would have given the LAF orders to shoot to kill.)

125. (S) Murr said that, if amnestied Sunni militants attempted to conduct any further attacks, he would "go after them, once and for all." In case it was not clear what he meant by this, he said that he did not want to run the risk that Parliament -- with elections coming by 2009 -- would grant amnesty yet again to "Danniyeh" and "Majdel Anjar" militants captured alive.

COMMENT

126. (S) We have not been able to verify Murr's claims to have so dramatically shifted the sectarian balance of the LAF (although we have seen evidence of new billets being created). The fact that Murr has had to do so -- assuming he really has done as much as he claims -- will strike American observers as at least a little disconcerting. For one thing, surely a counter-terrorism force without any Shi'as -- in a country where Shi'as make up the largest single confessional group (one credible estimate puts them at 35 percent, about the same proportion as all Christian groups put together) -- is not viable over the long term.

127. (S) Comment, continued: But the fact is that Murr may not have much of a choice. There is a disturbing rift between the Shi'a community and all other confessional groups on almost every basic issue facing Lebanon. A large proportion of Shi'as, in their support for Hizballah, effectively reject the standard definition of a territorial state. Pending future developments regarding Hizballah's weapons and greater political pluralism in the Shi'a community, stopgap measures may be needed. End comment.

128. (U) A/S Hillen did not have an opportunity to clear this cable.
FELTMAN